

Victoria (Wishikin) Wacheno Howard (1867-1930)

By Henry Zenk

Victoria (Wishikin) Wacheno Howard was the teller of Clackamas Chinook narratives and traditions transcribed by anthropologist Melville Jacobs and published by him as *Clackamas Chinook Texts* (1958-1959), one of the richest records of the Indigenous northwest Oregon storytelling art. While Jacobs referred to her invariably as “a Clackamas Chinook,” Howard’s origins were more complicated, though not unusually so for the tribally and linguistically diverse reservation community into which she was born and spent most of her life.

Victoria (locally, Victoire) Wishikin was born in 1867 on the Grand Ronde Reservation to William Wishikin, a Tualatin (Kalapuyan) tribesman, and Sarah, a daughter of Gwayakiti [wʰjʰkʰtʰ], the Molalla tribal chief at Grand Ronde. In northwest Oregon, a person’s natal tribal affiliation customarily followed that of his or her father. Victoria Wishikin owed her knowledge of the Clackamas language and culture not to her natal family, but to her maternal grandmother, who primarily raised her (her father having died when she was about eight years old), and her mother-in-law, with whom she lived while married to Dan Wacheno, a son of Daniel Wacheno [wʰtʰi:nu], the Clackamas tribal chief at Grand Ronde.

Clackamas is also the name linguists apply to the Upper Chinook dialects of the lower Willamette River and the Clackamas River. Victoria’s grandmother, Wagayuthlen [wʰjʰ:juʰn] spoke the dialect used at Willamette Falls. Her mother-in-law, Wasusgani [wʰsusʰni] (or Charlotte), though originally from a Chinookan-speaking group Indigenous to the Cascades of the Columbia River, had lived since a young woman among speakers of her husband’s Clackamas River dialect. Victoria also spoke the Molalla language, though not as fluently as she spoke Clackamas; and by her own account, she had grown up speaking Chinuk Wawa (Chinook Jargon), the original common language of the Grand Ronde Reservation. It is to her “clear English,” as Jacobs characterized it, that we owe not only his field translations of her Clackamas dictations but also a great deal of supplementary information he recorded from her on northwest Oregon Indigenous cultures and history. The multitribal and multilingual complexity illustrated by her life’s story was more the norm than the exception on the Grand Ronde Reservation during the late nineteenth century.

Victoria raised perhaps nine children with Dan Wacheno, all of whom predeceased her. The two eventually divorced, and in 1903 Victoria married Eustace Howard, a Santiam Kalapuya speaker from Grand Ronde. While the two remained connected to their Grand Ronde community, they also established a residence at West Linn. That is where Melville Jacobs worked with her beginning in 1928, shortly after assuming a position as professor of anthropology at the University of Washington.

Professor Jacobs dedicated much of his working career to documenting the endangered Indigenous languages and cultures of western Oregon. He was first led to Victoria Howard in hopes of documenting the Molalla language, but on discovering that she was much more fluent in Clackamas, he commenced to transcribe traditional narratives and ethnographic and historical descriptions in that language (1929-1930). During the same sessions, he sampled her knowledge of Chinuk Wawa and made audio recordings of her extensive repertoire of Indigenous songs.

Victoria Howard died of heart failure on September 26, 1930, survived by her husband Eustace, their daughter Agatha (Howard) Howe Bloom, and two granddaughters, Priscilla and Bernice.

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